



Wayne Atkinson, Yorta Yorta Native Title Claimant First Edition, Teacher Resource Kit, 1996

This is the edited text of a talk given by Wayne Atkinson in June 1999 for students of Units 3 and 4 Outdoor Education.

I would like to focus on some of the existing land conflicts between indigenous and introduced land management practices. First we need to look at the different ideologies on indigenous and non-indigenous land relationships. This will inevitably require an historic approach to the subject matter.

I want to begin by establishing a timeline of indigenous occupation and use of Australia by looking at the archaeological record and then looking at the origins of western land management practices. This will provide a context to contrast indigenous and non-indigenous land uses in Australia.

Main sites in Australia – in the context of other potential sites still to be found

- Lake Mungo to the north of the Murray in New South Wales. 3500 – 4000 years, but could be now 70,000 years bp
- Kow Swamp in the territory of the Yorta Yorta 12,000 – 15,000 years bp
- Keilor in Melbourne, 33,000bp
- Aboriginal rock shelter in Gariwerd, 20,000 years bp
- Lake George near Canberra, 120,000 years bp

Dates are pushing indigenous occupation back

As more dates are being produced, evidence of indigenous occupation is being pushed further back into antiquity. It is becoming more consistent with indigenous peoples' belief that they have always been here and their origins began here and nowhere else, as previously speculated.

Koori view of their origins and creation

Dreaming

We've looked at the scientific evidence. It's important to look at the indigenous view of where they believe they came from – beliefs that are just as valid as any other belief system about human origins and creation.

The concept of the Dreaming and what it means to Koori people

During the creation time, the ancestral heroes performed great deeds and gave life and form to the tribal lands. These ancestral beings still live in the country in spirit form, continually generating life. Throughout Australia, one of the important ancestors was the Rainbow Serpent, which was a huge snake. It was mainly associated with rain, spirit children and fertility.

Each tribe believed that its boundaries were fixed and validated by the spirit ancestors. There was no reason or desire to possess the country of another group. It was meaningless to tribes since their creation stories only related to their own piece of territory.

The essence of this religious belief is the oneness of the land and all that moved upon it. It was a view of the world in which humans and the natural species were all part of the same ongoing life force. Thus traditional aboriginal life was shaped by the dreamtime stories which were both an explanation of how the world came to be, and a blueprint for the way people must conduct their ongoing connections with the land.

Introduced land uses

Introduced land uses have their roots in the origins of western civilisation which began in the Mesopotamian valley of the Middle East (today's Iraq). According to archaeologists, it is the place where written language, laws and architectural systems are believed to have developed some 5000 to 6000 years ago.

During this time western farming practices developed along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Unfortunately, the removal of the indigenous vegetation to allow for the development of intensive irrigation for agriculture eventually destroyed much of the land. We need to review such approaches in relation to the Murray

Darling region. Those same land practices originally tried in the Middle East are now being called into question. Many scientists are now alerting us to the problems that future generations are going to inherit through what are regarded as 'scorched earth' approaches to land use. Their long-term sustainability is very limited.

Contrast with indigenous practices

In hindsight, indigenous people did not take the same path. They managed at the basic hunter gatherer level. Because of the events that took place some 200 years ago, we will never know whether or not indigenous Australians would have made such a transition. It may be more relevant to focus on how they were able to maintain their connections without getting locked in to the hunter gatherer / farming dichotomy. Indeed, there may have been no need to make such a transition.

There is certainly evidence that Kooris were moving along the continuum to a more settled lifestyle. There is also evidence that they developed some very sophisticated food production techniques along the way. Having got to such a level of efficiency which was in balance with the availability of resources and population levels, there may have been no need for such a change.

The evidence indicates that traditional aboriginal lifestyle was not an aimless wandering in search of food. It was one that was guided by an intimate knowledge of the land, its zoology, botany and ecology and the relationship between these elements and the seasons. Aborigines learned to read and understand the environment so well that they were environmental engineers in their own right. They moved to the various places at the right times of the year when the land was producing food and were able to sustain themselves from its produce rather than trying to bring the land under control and make it produce more and more. Tribal groups along the river had developed an intimate knowledge of where and when the variety of food sources were available and the means by which they could be obtained. They knew exactly when fish came into the lakes to feed and the turtles were ready for collecting. They also knew when to migrate to the mountains to feast on the bogong moths which gathered there on an annual basis.

Different food production techniques were used to make the environment produce more:

- Fire was used as a land management and food production technique. Edmund Curr, who took up land in the Murray Goulburn region (Yorta Yorta) observed that aborigines were consistently 'tilling their land and cultivating their pastures with fire' (Curr, 1965:88).
- Fish trap systems as storage facilities.
- Lagoons and creeks were used to store food.
- Weirs and channels were constructed to feed lagoons and store food.

Aborigines chose to move systematically across the land coming to nature's garden itself rather than trying to harness the land and bring it under control. This is a very intelligent and sophisticated lifestyle that would be the envy of many Australians today as we witness the gap between the rich and poor becoming increasingly greater. It was a lifestyle in which most Kooris could find their food in about 4-5 hours each day. The rest of the time was devoted to other important matters like the development and refinement of culture and the maintenance of connections with country.

Josephine Flood argues that these methods of food procurement were remarkable examples of resource management and environmental engineering. Furthermore, they illustrate that aborigines were more than capable of manipulating their environment, not necessarily to increase food but to increase its regularity and reliability. They ensured a longer term food supply for a minimum amount of energy investment. The implications of these strategies and those practised along the Murray and elsewhere in Australia is that aborigines were living a more sedentary way of life (Flood: 1983, 208).

Finally, Allen says that some aboriginal groups may have been poised for a long time a few steps along the agricultural pathway or indeed may have regressed from being further along such a pathway. Or in the words of archaeologist Brian Fagan, aborigines never adopted food production because they had no need to become



dependent on a lifeway that would reduce their leisure time and produce more food than they needed (Allen, 1977, 184 – Fagan 1983, 1778).

To summarise, aboriginal people saw their world around them from a completely different perspective to that of western ideology. The landscape's features were monuments to the activities of specific ancestral beings and, like any religious monuments, are 'sacred sites'. Aborigines did not seek to alter these features, as to do so would bring disaster. The local family group had the responsibility of caring for the land and its sacred sites, which included spirit centres. Natural species were linked to aboriginal people through totemic relationships and were classified with people into moieties. People ensured food supplies both through supernatural increase ceremonies, and through the practical system of food taboos. Again, people's actions did not impose change on species but rather sought to perpetuate their natural cycles. Aboriginal survival then depended not on exploiting the land and herding animals but on the very opposite – keeping things going just as they had been created by the ancestral beings.

It was these basic elements that connected indigenous people to the land and it was through the timeless practice of custom and tradition that the connections were successfully maintained.

Conclusions

In contrasting the approaches of indigenous and non indigenous land uses we can see that the conflict was inherent from the outset. Both ideologies were diametrically opposed. One was based on bringing the land under control and harnessing its resources while the other was more about living in harmony with the land as laid down by the ancestral beings.

Indigenous people have a long established track record in land management and care. It is this philosophy that guides much of the discussions on current and future land uses. Many indigenous groups like the Yorta Yorta have endeavoured to hold on to past land management practices while attempting to accommodate introduced and compatible land uses.

Conflicts become apparent in current day land management programs however, when indigenous perceptions on the land are not taken into account in future land uses. I will draw on some of my own experiences here working in indigenous land matters for many years. The Yorta Yorta involvement in the Barmah, Moira and Millewa Forests are a good example of how the conflicting ideologies on land use manifest themselves now.

Barmah Forest :
Yorta Yorta native title claim 1994-1999.

Discuss in light of Land Conservation Council study in the 1980s and the current native title claim policy document.

Yorta Yorta are guided by the way their ancestors have managed the land which they want to hold on to not as they were 150 years ago, but with some practical considerations etc.

Vested interest groups want to keep going down their chosen path which creates inevitable conflict and impasse.

Yorta Yorta only have advisory status whereas committees are dominated by vested interests which always win out at the end of the day. The numbers game prevails in the design and implementation of land management policies. Indigenous views in the southern parts of Australia are only given token recognition and because they are a minority on the various committees, their views are subordinate to western land management ideologies.

There are no similar joint management arrangements to that of Uluru, Kakadu or Katherine Gorge (Nitmilluk) where indigenous people are equal participants.

